

Earth-Friendly Gardening & Landscaping



The Amazing Amaryllis: Queen of Bulbs

The amaryllis is the largest, showiest and longest-lasting of spring-flowering bulbs, but it is also considered a tender bulb; meaning that it cannot be planted outdoors year-round. However, with proper care, this so-called tender specimen has been known to produce flowers for up to 75 years. Even with modest attention, it can bloom indoors from year to year, or can be repeatedly forced to bloom on cue by simply transplanting outdoors after blooming, and bringing the plant indoors before the first frost.

For quite some time, the amaryllis has been associated with winter-blooming favorites such as poinsettias and paperwhites. Lately, though, the bulb has found a new horticultural role. Upscale retailers have started packaging bulbs with names like 'Royal Velvet' in red-lacquered cachepots for Valentine's Day, and pink, salmon and yellow varieties in ribbon-adorned baskets for Mother's Day.

Regardless of when you want your bulb to bloom, the bulb is where it all begins. Look for firm, healthy bulbs with no sign of mold or damage; they should measure at least 2-1/2 inches in diameter. Only a large bulb will ensure blooming the first year. Smaller bulbs may produce disappointing foliage.

Next, plant the bulb in a pot several inches larger than the bulb's diameter. A five- to six-inch pot with

drainage holes generally will suffice, although larger bulbs may require pots up to eight inches across.

Because an amaryllis tends to be top-heavy, with flower stalks sometimes exceeding two feet or more, it is advisable to use a heavy terracotta pot filled with an inch or two of gravel, both for weight and drainage. Also, as a high-quality bulb can produce one or two flower stalks, each boasting up to six large trumpet shaped blooms, be sure there is a one- to two-inch space between the bulb and the edge of the pot so that a wire support or stake may be inserted as necessary.

For your planting media, many garden centers provide suitable mixes for bulbs. A homemade blend of two parts loamy soil (or standard potting mix), two parts compost and one part perlite, will do nicely. Be sure to leave half to three-quarters of the bulb above the soil level to avoid getting water and soil inside the neck of the bulb itself.

After watering thoroughly at the beginning, allow the soil to become somewhat dry and keep the pot in a draft-free area out of direct sunlight. Do not water already moist soil, as that is the surest way to cause the bulb and roots to rot. Once the bulb



sets forth its dramatic shoot, move the pot to a warm, sunny spot, resume regular watering and light fertilizing, and wait for the show to begin in about six to eight weeks. Upon flowering, remove the pot from direct sunlight to prolong the blooming period.

After the flowers have faded, cut the stalk down to just above the top of the bulb. Leaving the flower stalk intact will deplete the bulb's energy reserves as the plant will begin seed production. And while it is possible, even fun, to try propagating amaryllis from seed, those seedlings seldom breed true to the variety you purchased, and it will take years before producing a large-enough bulb will be capable of blooming.

Leave the large, graceful foliage in place and treat the plant like any other sun-loving houseplant. At this point, you can decide whether you simply want another houseplant, which will flower with some success each year, or whether you want to produce a bulb suitable for forcing next winter or spring.

As a houseplant, simply keep the pot in a sunny spot, continue watering and lightly fertilizing. It is essential to keep the plant growing and thriving after blooming to help the bulb develop new energy stores for re-flowering the following year.

However, after several months, usually by mid- to late summer, it is advisable to stop watering and feeding the plant, allowing the foliage to

turn yellow and wither. Cut off the spent leaves and allow the plant to rest in a cool, dark location for eight to 10 weeks. Once a new flower bud starts to emerge, return the pot to a sunny spot and wait for a repeat performance.

Another popular option is to sink the entire plant, pot and all, into a hole in the garden during the warmer weeks of May. Start in a sheltered location with dappled light, eventually moving the pot into full sun for the summer. Treat the amaryllis like any

other prized landscape plant with respect to care and feeding. By late summer or early fall, the foliage will start to fade and die, indicating that the bulb is going into a rest phase.

Be sure to bring the pot indoors before the first frost, and do not water it any further. As bulbs frequently grow about half an inch in diameter each year, consider removing the bulb, cleaning it with a dry cloth and repotting it in a larger container. If not, gently remove the top several inches of potting soil and replace it with a fresh soil mix.

Like the houseplant version, keep the amaryllis in a cool, dark location until you are ready to force it into new service. Count back six to eight weeks from your desired bloom date and start watering. Once the flower bud appears, the queen of bulbs is poised to return to light and new life.

The lore and lure of Amaryllis

The amaryllis, like all good plant names, has its origins in Greek mythology. As is often the case, a beautiful young maiden (or nymph) named Amaryllis, which is Greek for sparkling or twinkling, falls in love with a self-absorbed Adonis of a shepherd, who rejects her unless she can produce a truly unique flower. Consulting the Oracle at Delphi, she is instructed to pierce her breast with a golden arrow at the aloof shepherd's door. She does so for 30 nights, until at last Amaryllis, perhaps dying, calls out to her would-be lover, who emerges to see that the maiden's blood has given rise to the crimson-red flowers of this amazing new plant. There may or may not have been a happy ending.



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